

On the agenda: North-South research partnerships  
and agenda-setting processes

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Ottawa, Canada

August 2007

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## ABSTRACT

The agenda-setting process represents a formidable obstacle for many development research partnerships. The literature on North-South research cooperation often laments the continued domination of collaborative agendas by the interests of Northern donors and scholars, and almost invariably calls for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda-setting processes. Yet the implications of this statement and the obstacles to its realization are rarely examined in detail. As a modest response to this gap, the first section of this paper examines how bilateral donor strategies affect collaborative agenda-setting processes, focusing on the approaches adopted by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. It argues that donor policies definitively shape agenda-setting processes, chiefly by requiring Southern researchers to partner with Northern counterparts in order to receive support. The experiences of the Netherlands and the UK demonstrate that revamping bilateral donors' funding policies can potentially improve Southern researchers' ability to influence North-South research agendas, and diversify access to collaborative funding opportunities. However, even the most innovative partnership funding strategies cannot resolve all of the tensions and inequalities that characterize collaborative agenda-setting processes.

The second section explores researchers' motivations for entering into North-South partnerships; the obstacles Southern researchers encounter in agenda-setting processes; and the strategies they employ to ensure that research partnerships respond to their concerns. This analysis suggests that while strong Southern research organizations are best placed to maximize the benefits of collaboration, many of the organizations entering into partnerships lack a clear sense of their own priorities and other key institutional capacities critical to successful agenda negotiations. Although North-South partnerships can augment individual and institutional resources and skills, they are not a panacea for all the challenges associated with capacity-building and the creation and utilization of knowledge for development. Donors and researchers alike are therefore well-advised to recognize the limitations of this approach and use it prudently, as North-South partnerships are not necessarily the best way to advance research agendas rooted in Southern priorities.

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1972, the Northern and Southern delegates to an OECD Conference of Directors of Research and Training Institutes identified two major trends in international research cooperation. First, they applauded a growing commitment to Southern self-reliance. Second, they noted increased interest in “new forms” of North-South research collaboration, particularly inter-disciplinary, mutually beneficial partnerships managed in the South, and based on Southern priorities (Amin et al 1975: 790). 35 years later, North-South partnerships remain a prominent feature on the development research landscape, but donors and researchers are still struggling to come to terms with these “new forms” of cooperation.

Partnership suffers from no lack of proponents. Amongst many donors and researchers, partnership is often seen as a good in and of itself, and arguing against partnership is akin to standing up against motherhood or friendship. Advocates of North-South research partnership suggest that it is efficient, intellectually enriching, and conducive to capacity building. Above all, it is seen as mutually beneficial (Hatton and Schroeder 2007: 157-158). Yet veterans of North-South research partnerships attest to a more complex reality, shaped first and foremost by the fact that “partnering” is often the only way for Southern researchers to access funding. Alongside the benefits of partnership comes a range of obstacles, from language barriers and complex management structures, to inequitable access to financial resources, libraries, conferences, training and publishing opportunities. Mismatched expectations, lack of face-to-face interaction, and different levels of methodological sophistication can also throw a wrench into partnership plans.

The agenda-setting process represents a particularly formidable obstacle for many development research partnerships. The literature on North-South research cooperation often laments the continued domination of collaborative agendas by the interests of Northern donors and scholars, and almost invariably calls for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda-setting processes. Yet the implications of this statement and the obstacles to its realization are rarely examined in detail. This lacuna is striking, because the developmental impact of research initiatives is typically limited if they are divorced from Southern priorities. Furthermore, better integrating Southern perspectives into collaborative research agendas promises to enrich the quality and insightfulness of scholarship in fields from disaster management and urban planning to competition policy and biodiversity.

As a modest response to this gap, the first section of this paper examines how bilateral donor strategies affect collaborative agenda-setting processes, focusing on the approaches adopted by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. I argue that donor policies definitively shape agenda-setting processes, chiefly by requiring Southern researchers to partner with Northern counterparts in order to receive support. The experiences of the Netherlands and the UK demonstrate that revamping bilateral donors’ funding policies may improve Southern researchers’ ability to influence North-South research agendas, and diversify access to collaborative funding opportunities. However, even the most innovative funding strategies

cannot resolve all of the tensions and inequalities that characterize collaborative agenda-setting processes.

The second section explores researchers' motivations for entering into North-South partnerships; the obstacles Southern researchers encounter in agenda-setting processes; and the strategies they employ to ensure that research partnerships respond to their concerns. This analysis suggests that while North-South partnerships have the potential to advance the production of knowledge for development, strong Southern research organizations are best placed to maximize the benefits of collaboration. However, many of the organizations entering into partnerships lack a clear sense of their own priorities and other institutional capacities critical to successful agenda negotiations. Although North-South partnerships can augment individual and institutional resources and skills, they are not a panacea for all the challenges associated with capacity-building and the creation of knowledge to inform sustainable development policies. Donors and researchers alike are therefore well-advised to recognize the limitations of this approach and use it prudently, as North-South partnerships are not necessarily the best way to advance agendas rooted in Southern priorities.

These arguments are informed by an analysis of contemporary donor policies, as well as by the understanding of North-South partnerships and development research funding that I gained while working with IDRC's Canadian Partnerships Program.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the article draws extensively on the results of 43 semi-structured interviews on North-South research partnerships that I conducted in Europe, the Middle East and Southern Africa with donors, NGO representatives, academic officials and migration and governance researchers.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were carried out in English between October 2006 and March 2007, and each lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. I focused on the fields of migration and governance because these are timely, contentious issues that place the question of setting equitable, locally appropriate research agendas in sharp relief. However, this article does not analyze the distinctive challenges facing migration

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<sup>1</sup> IDRC is a Canadian organization that works closely with Southern researchers engaged in the pursuit of healthier, prosperous and more equitable societies. The Canadian Partnerships Program supports cooperation between different sectors of the Canadian development research community. This collaboration frequently involves the participation of Southern counterparts. See <http://www.idrc.ca/en/cp/>.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted in the following locations: the Netherlands (8), the United Kingdom (5), Botswana (4), South Africa (9), Jordan (8), and Israel and the Palestinian Territories (9). I contacted the initial pool of interviewees largely on the basis of recommendations provided by program officers at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and expanded the interview pool on the basis of independent research and suggestions from various interviewees. Participants' names and identifying details have been omitted to preserve confidentiality.

and governance researchers involved in North-South partnerships.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it offers a more holistic discussion of agenda-setting challenges, given that these interviews underlined that many of the difficulties associated with agenda-setting are common to different fields. Yet, making accurate generalizations about researchers' experiences is a delicate task. Owing to the highly personalized nature of partnership experiences, there are exceptions to almost every trend.

## SLIPPERY TERMINOLOGY

Before proceeding, the slippery terms employed in this study demand a word of clarification. First, while the terms "North" and "South" usefully underscore how geography and colonial history have structured development and research opportunities, they are certainly not discrete terms. In fact, the practice of partnership underlines the impossibility of using these terms as binary opposites, as many of the foremost actors in international research cooperation elude easy categorization as "Northern" or "Southern".<sup>4</sup> For instance, countries like South Africa, Brazil, China and India are home to well-financed, world-class research institutions, which operate alongside innumerable organizations struggling simply to pay their bills. International organizations such as United Nations agencies often play major roles in research cooperation, but cannot be neatly labelled "Northern" or "Southern". Individual researchers also subvert the North-South "divide", as many Southern citizens pursue their education and careers in the North. At the same time, in some fields a growing number of Northern researchers are joining Southern institutions.

This study is concerned with agenda-setting processes in North-South development research partnerships. Development research may be defined as "applied research that has the objective of leading directly to sustainable improvement in the quality of human existence or basic research that results in an improved understanding of factors that affect development" (Foley et al 1998). To be sure, there are no monolithic research agendas on any issue in the global North and South. Rather, broad regional and national priorities are tempered by factors ranging from institutional mandates and community-level economic interests to individuals' political convictions and socio-cultural allegiances. Development research agendas are increasingly enriched by the involvement in research partnerships of not only university-based academics,

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of North-South partnerships and forced migration research agendas, see M. Bradley (forthcoming) "Refugee Research Agendas: The Influence of Donors and North-South Partnerships", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that in some regions North and South is not the most relevant terminology of partnership. In the Middle East, for example, many researchers suggested to me that the key distinction structuring research partnerships was not North-South, but West-Muslim World.



but also policymakers, practitioners, NGO representatives, and members of communities grappling directly with the causes and consequences of poverty.

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Just as there are innumerable research agendas, there are a myriad of partnership modalities, including one-on-one co-authorship, training schemes, institutional twinning arrangements, networks, and the co-management of journals and other publications. Partnerships also vary remarkably in their duration, composition, budgets, and the extent to which they focus on capacity building. This study is principally concerned with partnerships linking teams of researchers in the global North and South, which aim to produce new knowledge to support the development process. Although various authors have attributed different meanings to partnership, collaboration and cooperation, throughout this study these terms are employed interchangeably, reflecting their practical usage by the participants in North-South exchanges.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There are pitfalls to any set of terminology. An important shortcoming of my use of the term “collaboration” was pointed out to me by Palestinian researchers who stressed that in their context, “collaboration” denotes support for the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. This is of course not my meaning.

## **NORTH-SOUTH PARTNERSHIPS: DONOR POLICIES AND THE BUSINESS OF RESEARCH COOPERATION<sup>6</sup>**

The pervasive influence of donors on North-South research partnerships is widely accepted as a foregone conclusion amongst many experienced researchers. Indeed, according to many Southern researchers, it is a “buyer’s market” where partnerships and research agendas are concerned. Research funding opportunities are limited, and collaboration with Northern institutions is often a prerequisite for support; consequently, many Southern researchers enter into partnerships far removed from their own priorities, simply to generate the income required to stay afloat. Yet, many researchers object that this approach reduces research cooperation to a business, despite the fact that many of its benefits (and harms) are not easily quantified or aggregated. While bilateral donors have received the lion’s share of the blame for the continued Northern dominance of collaborative research agendas, these agencies operate under a wide range of different “business models”, some of which are more conducive than others to bolstering Southern priorities.<sup>7</sup>

Assessing donors’ influence on collaborative research agendas is a complex task, as donor priorities and researchers’ interests are constantly interacting and evolving, and it cannot be assumed that donor policies affect all recipients in a uniform manner. Studies on donor influence typically concentrate on how funding policies affect advocacy efforts and field interventions, rather than research. This literature struggles to identify and account for the numerous variables that increase or decrease donors’ influence, and the case studies used to explicate donors’ influence are often anecdotal (Minear and Weiss 1995, Vakil 1997). At the general level, however, donors’ impact on collaborative research agendas is best understood on a spectrum from direct to indirect influence.

While deeply troubling, overt donor interference in shaping or restricting the dissemination of research results appears to be relatively rare. Instead, donors exert considerable indirect influence over agenda-setting processes by identifying their programming priorities and establishing the structure of the international research funding system. Many facets of donor influence are well-known, and their merits hotly debated: for example, donors influence the development of research agendas by requiring the studies they support to be explicitly “policy-relevant”; by concertedly supporting multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder projects; and by

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<sup>6</sup> A leading Southern researcher I interviewed used the term “partnership” to convey the major role economic interests play in the creation of North-South research partnerships.

<sup>7</sup> To be sure, other members of the donor community, such as independent foundations, research councils and the private sector also shape the creation of collaborative research agendas. The strengths and shortcomings of these donors’ approaches certainly merit further examination, but are beyond the scope of this study.

constantly revising or scuttling certain programmatic priorities, which can impede researchers' efforts to create coherent, long-term research plans. Donors also affect agenda-setting efforts through their categorization of different countries in the South. Botswana, for instance, is defined by most bilateral donors as a Middle Income Country, rendering researchers in the country ineligible for many funding streams. Since domestic funding remains scarce, various research institutions in Botswana continue to pursue international support by repositioning themselves as brokers for regional and inter-regional collaborative work. This strategy underlines that despite donors' considerable influence, researchers do not simply respond to donors' frameworks, but challenge their policies, priorities and the assumptions that underpin them.

Perhaps most significantly, donors affect agenda-setting processes by making partnership a prerequisite for funding. Using North-South partnerships as a "default" funding modality not only adds an extra layer to agenda negotiations, but also creates a problematic starting point for articulating common research goals. As Hatton and Schroeder (2007: 157) argue, "the funding context within which partnerships must exist...increasingly represents a significant barrier to genuine partnership among Northern and Southern organizations." In a context in which partnership is all too often "forced rather than volunteered" (Hatton and Schroeder 2007: 158), to what extent can carefully honed donor strategies mitigate inequities in collaborative agenda-setting processes?

## **"ALMOST AN IDEOLOGY": DUTCH SUPPORT FOR DEMAND-DRIVEN PARTNERSHIPS**

In the early 1990s under the leadership of then-Minister of International Development Jan Pronk, the Dutch government launched a program of "experiments" in demand-driven research. According to Nair and Menon (2002: 2), demand-led research refers to "activities in which people are able to bring about their own development, with the objective of building up research systems to unleash the potential of the South". Although experimental, the Netherlands' demand-driven approach was a comprehensive policy that aimed to make a "novel" contribution to development research, in large part by reducing the influence of Dutch academics and policymakers and transferring managerial and substantive responsibility for Dutch-supported research programs to Southern researchers and communities. The demand-driven policy was manifested in a handful of innovative projects including nine Multi-annual Multi-disciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs) and several "symmetrical cooperation" projects, including the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD), the South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), the Ghanaian-Dutch Programme of Health Research for Development, and the Philippine-Dutch Programme of Biodiversity Research for Development. While the Dutch Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DGIS) channelled direct support to Southern researchers through the MMRPs, some of the symmetrical cooperation projects were overseen by the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (Rawoo), an advisory body based in the Hague.

Although the demand-driven programmes absorbed a considerable proportion of DGIS research specialists' time and energy, the projects did not represent a significant percentage of the agency's budget for development research, much of which continued to be directed towards more traditional research partnerships. Rather than being managed by embassy staff in the South, the demand-driven projects were supervised by a dedicated group of staff at DGIS headquarters in the Hague, whom observers of the process have described as having an "almost ideological" commitment to the demand-driven approach. The research agendas guiding these projects were determined through carefully crafted "demand articulation" processes, often involving civil society advocates and community representatives, but the proponents of these projects nonetheless struggled to resolve what the Dutch refer to as the "Ganuza dilemma": when Southern stakeholders express competing demands, whose priorities should receive support?<sup>8</sup> Dutch advocates of the demand-driven approach stressed that lack of Southern consensus was not an invitation for Northern donors and researchers to substitute their own priorities, nor could local priorities be trumped by appealing to the pressing nature of global problems of concern to Northern populations, such as environmental degradation. However, champions of the demand-driven approach were also forced to recognize that Southern researchers were not always the best allies in advancing locally defined priorities as the basis for development research. Often, researchers in the South "inhabited ivory towers at least as high as those of their counterparts in the North" (Van de Sande 2006: 3).

The success of the Netherlands' demand-driven approach is a matter of debate—but while the construction of equitable development research agendas is little more than an obscure puzzle for academics and bureaucrats in most political constituencies, over the past fifteen years debate on the demand-driven approach took place at remarkably high levels in the Netherlands, including in parliament. From its genesis, DGIS's demand-driven policy sparked contention as it challenged the historical dominance of Dutch scholars in the research process and undercut, albeit minimally, their preferential access to development research funding.

Although DGIS staff members were concerned to counteract the perception that demand-driven research and North-South collaboration were mutually exclusive, it proved difficult to meld the demand-driven approach with the notion of mutually beneficial partnership. To preclude the possibility of Northern domination of the research agenda, the Southern partners had considerable control over decision-making processes, which at times resulted in the adoption of research questions of little interest to the Dutch participants. Furthermore, the collaborative projects had cumbersome managerial and decision-making structures, prompting some Dutch researchers to conclude that the minimal amount of funding DGIS provided was not worth the trouble. Despite the government's professed commitment to supporting Southern demands, various observers pointed out that the projects' research agendas were remarkably relevant to the Netherlands' development priorities, thus generating scepticism regarding the independence

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<sup>8</sup> The dilemma carries the name of Latin American sociologist Enrique Ganuza, who articulated the problem in 1989 at an influential conference on development research in Groningen, the Netherlands.

of the demand articulation processes. Within DGIS, however, supporters of the demand-driven approach are confident that the policy resulted in innovative, locally relevant research agendas. It was suggested to me that a sign of the policy's significance was that it ruffled other bilateral donors, who regarded some DGIS-supported research as overly radical.

While the rhetoric of responding to local demands has been mainstreamed throughout the Dutch development architecture and is au courant in the broader donor community, the Netherlands has reverted to a more traditional approach to supporting development research, firmly grounded in "enlightened self-interest". This shift was prompted by a combination of factors including academic protest and the rise of a more conservative political climate in the Netherlands, and is clearly reflected in the title of DGIS's 2003 development policy statement: Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities: Dutch development cooperation en route to 2015. This policy emphasizes the role of North-South partnerships in the Netherlands' development assistance strategy, but downplays the provision of direct support to Southern researchers and the importance of supporting locally-defined priorities.<sup>9</sup> In 2006, the Netherlands announced its intention to enhance its support for development research partnerships through the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), a branch of the national research council, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Soon after, in 2007, the government disbanded Rawoo, an organization historically outspoken in its support for demand-driven research.

WOTRO is committed to supporting research in accordance with both Southern and Northern priorities, and in 2006 released a new strategy that will guide the agency in this task (WOTRO 2006). The new strategy's thematic framework is based on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). One can question whether the MDGs represent a legitimate Southern agenda, and WOTRO is supporting critical research on this very issue. Beyond the inevitably thorny problem of how to determine what constitutes a Southern agenda, WOTRO's institutional structure and mandate represent formidable obstacles complicating its efforts to support collaborative research in tune with Southern priorities. The only research council in the Netherlands, the NWO functions as an umbrella organization under which agencies including WOTRO cooperate with one another while simultaneously competing for their share of the council's centralized pool of funding. Balancing the imperatives of intra-organizational cooperation and competition is a major challenge for all the bodies within the NWO, but is often particularly difficult for WOTRO as a development agency. For example, as part of the Dutch research council, WOTRO does not generally have the latitude to fund Southern researchers independently, but seeks to involve Southern scholars in partnerships with Dutch counterparts. Using Dutch money to support Southern researchers is not uniformly accepted throughout NWO, nor is inter-disciplinary, policy-relevant development research necessarily held in high esteem throughout the organization.

As part of the national research council, WOTRO is obliged to award funding on the basis of blind peer reviews that promote "research excellence" first and foremost. WOTRO staff

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<sup>9</sup> The 2005 DGIS policy memorandum Research in Development also makes several modifications to the demand-driven approach in effect since 1992.

members express strong support for the principle of peer review, arguing that it is unethical to fund development research that is not scientifically reliable. However, WOTRO recognizes the shortcomings of the peer review process, particularly when applied to proposals for North-South development research partnerships. Because the members of peer review panels are typically Northern academics with little development experience, the process often fails to value the developmental impact of the proposed work, focusing instead on questions of theoretical rigour. Further, Northern reviewers are often suspicious of inter-disciplinary research, and start from the assumption that policy-relevant research is scientifically sub-optimal. Reviewers charged with identifying the most academically “excellent” proposals are also not in a position to consider how projects may advance development by strengthening the capacities of the partners and their institutions.

In response to these limitations, WOTRO has introduced several innovations to its proposal development and peer review processes. For example, WOTRO provides funds for teams to gather in the South to develop rigorous proposals that incorporate Southern perspectives from the outset, and are more likely to weather the peer review process. Proponents are given the opportunity to sharpen their proposals in response to feedback raised through an initial review. Proposals must be accompanied by support letters from NGOs or other stakeholders, and community advisory boards including NGO representatives and policymakers weigh in on partnership proposals, focusing in particular on the developmental relevance of the proposed research. However, because of the risk of polarized discussions, community advisory boards and the scientific panels will not sit down to review proposals together, and the scientific committees make the final decisions on whether proposals are accepted.

WOTRO’s efforts demonstrate how a Northern funding agency facing significant institutional constraints can endeavour to create conditions more amenable to the expression and validation of Southern research priorities. Whether these innovations actually translate into the approval of North-South partnerships grounded in equitable, mutually beneficial research agendas remains to be seen. Although the symmetrical research partnerships’ agenda-setting processes were far from smooth, DGIS’s “experiments” in demand-driven research placed the Netherlands in a leadership role amongst bilateral donors, challenging preconceived notions of how development research is done and supported. In comparison to this approach, the current Dutch policy appears to be a return to an earlier way of doing business, in which Northern researchers’ contributions and concerns are centre stage, or at least close by.<sup>10</sup> Taken in total, the Dutch experience demonstrates how ambitious commitment to supporting Southern research agendas is dependent on the political climate in donor countries, and that even the most ambitious or ideological commitment to advancing Southern agendas cannot fully resolve the challenges presented by agenda-setting in the context of North-South research partnerships. At best, donor

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<sup>10</sup> The prevalence of this approach amongst bilateral donors is reflected in the Report of the Danish Commission on Development-Related Research, which was convened to examine “Denmark’s future role

policies can attempt to mitigate any disadvantages to Southern researchers as the parties navigate the agenda-setting process.

## **BEYOND NORTH AND SOUTH? BRITISH PARTNERSHIP FUNDING STRATEGIES**

While the Dutch have reverted to a more traditional collaborative research funding strategy, the British have emerged as one of the most progressive and reflective of the bilateral agencies involved in funding research for development. To be sure, all progress is relative; despite improvements in some bilateral agencies' strategies, many Southern researchers still prefer to work with independent funders such as the Ford Foundation, which often have greater flexibility than bilateral agencies obliged to advance Northern foreign policies.

Two events stand out as having significantly shaped the approach to research partnerships embraced by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The first was the UK government's affirmation of the key role of science in the achievement of the MDGs, and its subsequent decision to dramatically increase funding for development research, doubling its 2005/2006 budget of £110 million to £220 million in 2010. DFID provides direct support to national research teams, as well as to international partnerships.

The second key event has direct bearing on how DFID supports these partnerships: the passage of the 2002 Development Act officially untied all British development aid, with the result that DFID-sponsored research partnerships can no longer require the involvement of British researchers. Rather, grants are awarded on the basis of open competition between researchers worldwide. While the British academic community was initially hostile to this policy, DFID's efforts to untie development aid have garnered broad support over recent years. DFID officials attribute this change to researchers' recognition that tying aid is morally dubious, and their awareness that they need to be prepared to compete in a "global market of ideas", without relying on the British government for preferential treatment.

At the same time as it has banned partnerships that formally require the participation of British researchers, DFID is questioning the very significance of the terms North and South to development research cooperation. Although DFID broadly supports the view that collaborative research agendas should respond to Southern concerns, the salience of North and South as categories to structure international research cooperation is called into doubt by the emergence of countries such as Brazil and China as new research powerhouses, and the transboundary nature of development challenges such as climate change and migration.<sup>11</sup> The propensity to question the relevance and timeliness of traditional North-South research partnerships is shared

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<sup>11</sup> as a provider of development research", and frankly admitted that "the development of indigenous research capacity in developing countries, in itself much to be welcomed, [poses] new challenges for the Danish development research sector" (DANIDA 2001).

by scholars at various leading UK development research institutes. For example, Haddad (2006: 15-16) underlines that the “North does not have a monopoly on solutions nor does the South have a monopoly on problems...A research model that looks at an issue across a wide range of contexts, unencumbered by labels of North and South, that can connect chains of events across the world and that can see an issue from multiple perspectives...has to be more independent, legitimate, rounded and integrated than current models.”

The full implications of these changes and debates in terms of ensuring that Southern voices are heard in collaborative agenda-setting processes are yet to be seen. Although many applaud the move away from privileging domestic researchers’ access to partnership opportunities, others are sceptical about the sincerity and sustainability of the policy, noting that UK institutions have not yet been edged out of DFID-funded partnership opportunities. While this may be a testament to the quality of development research in Britain, various researchers and donors question whether this policy change has yet and will ever percolate into practice, given the close connections between DFID and certain British development research institutions. Indeed, various observers in the academic and donor communities suggest that domestic opposition to the policy will likely increase if British institutions’ access to partnership funding and control over DFID-supported research agendas diminishes. Just as DFID grant-makers may not always recognize when Southern institutions are better placed than their British counterparts to take on the leadership of international research projects, there are denizens of Southern organizations that are simply not yet ready to take on this type of work. It remains unclear how DFID’s excellence-focused strategy will surmount this problem, to support not only cutting-edge, practical research, but also nascent Southern institutions’ ability to carry out such work.

While reflecting on the relevance of North and South to contemporary development research partnerships may add nuance to DFID’s approach, the drive to “globalize” collaborative agendas may in fact detract from efforts to advance Southern priorities and enable timely, evidence-based policymaking in the poorest countries and communities. Making links between conditions in far-flung communities may result in more sophisticated interpretations of development problems and policy imperatives. However, it may also overshadow local research agendas, which are arguably more likely to make direct contributions to resolving the challenges faced by the poorest countries. IDRC’s extensive experience of supporting development research in a variety of fields suggests that while Southern researchers are certainly interested in international-level debates and analyses, they are often sceptical about the practical importance of this work, and are particularly driven to carry out specific, ground-level analyses that can have direct and immediate impact in their own contexts. When programs such as IDRC’s Peace, Conflict and Development initiative operate in a wholly responsive manner, the proposals submitted by Southern scholars focus on specific, pressing, local concerns, and almost never concentrate on “trendy” issues occupying Northern scholars (Scholey 2006: 185). This experience may serve as a reminder of the importance of recognizing the qualitatively different nature of many research agendas in the global North and South, and as a rejoinder to the suggestion that internationalized, comparative studies are the most fruitful direction for donor-funded development research in the future.



## THE PERSISTENT FACE OF BUSINESS AS USUAL

Taken in total, the experiences of the Netherlands and the UK demonstrate that revised bilateral donor policies have the potential to improve Southern researchers' ability to influence collaborative research agendas while broadening access to partnership opportunities. However, even the most innovative partnership funding strategies cannot resolve all of the tensions and inequalities that characterize collaborative agenda-setting processes. The impact of changes in donors' funding strategies are tempered by factors including changes in political climate; the attitudes of domestic researchers; and the mandate and structure of institutions responsible for implementing collaborative funding programs. The experiences of the UK and the Netherlands also illustrate the difficulty of translating policy innovations into improved practice. As weighty bureaucracies accustomed to using Northern-directed partnerships as a primary modus operandi, bilateral donor agencies may be slow to internalize and act on new policy initiatives, even those that promise to advance widely accepted principles, such as the importance of grounding research partnerships in Southern priorities.

Many of the seasoned researchers I interviewed suggested that Southern partners often have more leverage in agenda negotiations than is commonly assumed. This is due in large part to the popularization of donor policies that require North-South partnerships to be headquartered at Southern institutions. Various Northern researchers underlined the importance of this shift, pointing out that responsibility for the management of partnerships often translates into increased influence in substantive agenda-setting processes. However, this policy is not uniformly popular amongst Southern researchers, some of whom argue that it reflects the unfounded assumption that all Southern institutions are weak and require more experience in project management. When proficient but under-resourced Southern organizations work with longstanding, trusted Northern partners, it can be beneficial to base partnerships in the North, as this relieves the administrative burden on the Southern side. These researchers maintain that flexible donor policies that can account for the nuances of each partnership situation are preferable to blanket policies that uniformly require partnerships to be based in the North or in the South.

My interviews with both researchers and bilateral donor representatives also highlighted pervasive confusion and unresolved tensions surrounding the rationale for bilateral donors' support for North-South research partnerships. On one hand, most donors adopt the rhetoric of the demand-driven approach, suggesting that their goal is to support Southern priorities, as defined by Southern researchers, leaders and community members themselves. On the other hand there is strong support amongst donors and Southern researchers in particular, for the idea that partnerships should be mutually, and even equally, beneficial. Indeed, many of the Southern researchers I interviewed objected to the notion that their views should automatically predominate above those of their Northern counterparts and donor representatives. Integrating the concerns of all partners and donors is, they argued, an essential part of productive research cooperation, and respect for the Northern citizens who provide the bilateral agencies' money.

As these researchers stress, demand-driven partnerships and mutually beneficial partnerships are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Yet, balancing the interests of Northern and Southern researchers, institutions, communities and governments is rarely a simple task. While the prevention and resolution of poverty is surely in the general interest of both the North and South, there is clearly heated debate over the best route to take to achieve this goal, and it would be a grave oversimplification to suggest that Southern priorities can always be met without a cost to the interests of Northern actors at numerous levels.

Confronting the potential dissonance between the concept of equally or mutually beneficial partnerships, and the commitment to prioritising Southern demands, is an important first step towards ensuring that donor strategies and North-South partnerships are based on coherent, viable principles. Some funders have made more progress than others in reflecting on and refining their approaches to supporting development research, including North-South partnerships. Numerous interviewees emphasized the need for these “progressive donors” to take on a leadership role, challenging the face of “business as usual” in the donor community. First and foremost, this entails a judicious approach to the use of North-South partnerships as a funding modality. Donor financing should be prefaced by detailed institutional assessments and open discussions with Southern researchers and governments. These discussions should identify when alternative funding modalities such as direct support to Southern institutions are more timely and appropriate approaches to advancing critical development research agendas than North-South partnerships. Second, while many welcome the drive towards donor coordination, experienced researchers caution that this can stifle the emergence of innovative collaborative agendas. When donors overly focused on coordination go “to the field”, they are more keen to talk to their fellow funders, than to prioritize the opportunity to speak to Southern researchers and community members about their priorities and concerns. This risks muting Southern perspectives in favour of consensus rooted in the North.

Individual donor representatives can make invaluable contributions to facilitating the development of equitable collaborative research agendas, and prompting change from within the donor establishment. Yet, numerous researchers stressed to me that individual donor representatives could also do serious harm, by establishing cliques of Southern contacts, over-empowering certain researchers and their agendas. Rather than simply relying on leadership from donor institutions and representatives, interviewees stressed the need for complementary leadership from researchers as well as from Southern governments. While the governments of emerging research powerhouses such as India and South Africa are well-placed to pressure donors to retune their policies in accordance with Southern agendas, convincing these governments to take a stand on the issue is a difficult proposition. The question of research collaboration and equitable agenda-setting remains a low priority for national governments, despite the impact it has on efforts to understand and respond to development challenges from environmental management to political reform.

## **ADVANCING AGENDAS: SOUTHERN MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES**

Given the perpetual elusiveness of “genuine” partnerships and the limited role donor policies play in facilitating equitable agenda-setting processes, why do Southern researchers and institutions continue to pursue partnerships? How do Southern researchers advance their agendas, in spite of restrictive cooperation frameworks and often crippling institutional contexts? The abundant literature on North-South research partnerships illuminates some of the goals and strategies guiding Northern researchers involved in international research cooperation, but is virtually silent on the subject of Southern aims and approaches to agenda-setting. In response to this dearth in the literature, concerted efforts were made during the design and execution of this study to draw out the perspectives of Southern researchers from a wide variety of professional and institutional backgrounds. Naturally, this does not mitigate the need for more research and reflection on the partnership process from Southern researchers themselves.

Although this study focuses on substantive agenda-setting processes, my discussions with Southern researchers highlighted the multitude of interconnected, often competing agendas at stake in North-South partnerships. Much like substantive research agendas, capacity building activities are subject to competing interests, and must be negotiated alongside management and research dissemination strategies. Prior to identifying shared research questions, diverse personal and institutional interests determine who gets involved in partnerships in the first place. In both the North and South, access to cooperation opportunities is shaped by factors such as age, gender, professional seniority, social class, religious convictions and political affiliations. Indeed, researchers’ drive to find “like-minded” partners can preclude cooperation with those best-placed to provide insight into particular research questions. For example, Islamist scholars are almost universally shut out of North-South research partnerships examining the rise of political Islam.

Time and again, my discussions with Southern researchers underlined that partners’ motivations and agenda-setting strategies cannot be understood through uni-dimensional analyses that focus only on the interests of researchers, institutions, governments or community groups. Rather, these different levels of interest constantly intersect, both enriching and confounding agenda-setting processes.

### **WHY PARTNER?**

“Received wisdom” in the donor community suggests that researchers seek out North-South partnerships principally in order to gain access to data and field work opportunities, while Southern researchers are primarily looking for funding and the chance to publish in Northern peer-reviewed journals. My interviews affirmed that access to data, funding and publishing opportunities are major motivators for prospective partners, but that they are mediated by a range of other interests, depending on the partners’ mandate and strengths.

While the opportunity to travel and the desire to contribute to development and poverty alleviation are important incentives for Northern and Southern researchers alike, amongst the researchers interviewed, almost without exception, access to funding stood out as a principal impetus to partner. This is partially a reaction to the structure of the international research funding system, in which most Southern governments have insufficient resources available to support domestic researchers, resulting in reliance on international donors who use North-South partnerships as a dominant funding modality. Although some donors certainly accept independent proposals from both Northern and Southern proponents, even prominent Southern institutions often struggle to secure support when they compete against well-connected, accomplished Northern organizations. Consequently, partnerships are a key source of funding for many Southern institutions, despite the fact that direct donor support remains their preference. Partnerships may be particularly appealing as a funding avenue for Southern institutions, because their Northern counterparts are often better placed to secure large grants covering salaries and infrastructure. Furthermore, pairing up with influential Northern organizations may improve Southern institutions' ability to attract independent support in the future. However, many Southern researchers emphasized to me that preserving their scholarly reputation and personal and institutional integrity was more important than funding, and highlighted instances when they turned down or withdrew from partnerships that could have endangered either.

My discussions with Southern researchers confirmed that the desire to publish, like the drive to secure funding, is subject to a number of provisos. The opportunity to publish in elite, peer reviewed journals was simply not a top concern for various civil society research organizations primarily dedicated to channelling research into local and national policymaking processes. Although these organizations did not covet publications in top-tier Northern journals, they welcomed occasions to share their work with wider audiences, and appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with Northern academics who had the time and commitment necessary to shepherd their joint research through the peer review process. On the downside, when collaborative research papers were unable to weather the peer review process, Northern partners occasionally stymied the dissemination of the work through grey literature publications or other channels, as they were unwilling to be associated with research that did not meet the top standards of western scholarship.

Access to data proved to be a significant impetus to partner for Southern researchers as well as their Northern colleagues. North-South research partnerships often provide Southern researchers with access to electronic libraries and extensive statistical databases held at Northern universities. At the same time as interviewees stressed the fallacy of viewing North-South research partnerships as exercises in Southern capacity building, access to professional opportunities such as conferences and tailored training programs for junior staff represented important motivations to partner. Equally, for national-level Southern organizations seeking to expend to the regional or international scene, North-South partnerships are also a valuable source of contacts and advice. Indeed, partnerships can serve as a laboratory for the development and refining of globalized institutional visions. For example, at Birzeit University in the West Bank, North-South research partnerships prompted new thinking on the "internationalization" of the university, broadening horizons that might otherwise have been

foreclosed by lack of resources and the pressure of the occupation. In return for these benefits, Southern researchers contribute their own contacts, linguistic abilities, methodological expertise and knowledge of local conditions, which often translates into nuanced theoretical insight.

Beyond funding, publishing, access to data and capacity building benefits, Southern researchers confirmed that North-South cooperation holds out the possibility of richer learning and scholarly output, particularly when considering truly global issues such as climate change and the spread of pandemics. Partnerships allow researchers to gain direct insight into the diverse manifestations of particular phenomena, and open up opportunities for scholars to refine their theoretical approaches. The opportunities partnerships present for international interaction and collegial debate are especially valuable when domestic research communities are isolated or small.

Particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts, the decision to engage in international research cooperation is often a carefully considered political statement. In dangerous locales, affiliation with a prominent Northern organization can lend a degree of added protection to Southern researchers undertaking sensitive work, while in volatile political environments, trusted Northern partners can provide valuable outside advice and play a critical role in removing barriers to the research process by rallying political and diplomatic pressure against officials obstructing fieldwork activities (Brookings 2007: 8).<sup>11</sup> In some cases, partnerships are pursued because they bolster Southern researchers' political clout and policy influence. This varies according to the partners' policy target. For example, if Southern organizations aim to amend the policies of Northern governments or United Nations agencies, North-South cooperation often augments Southern researchers' perceived credibility and access to decision-makers. Northern researchers may also convey their Southern partners' concerns directly to their political representatives in capitals from Washington to London. However, the leverage gained through partnerships often declines if researchers seek to influence Southern policymakers, many of whom prefer "home-grown" analyses, and may be hostile to Northern "interference" in their sovereign political affairs. Indeed, politically prudent Northern researchers and NGOs seeking to influence Southern governments often team up with prominent Southern organizations, in order to benefit from their specialized lobbying expertise and political connections.

Notably, in countries such as Iraq and Iran, affiliation with a Northern organization can have the opposite effect, drastically heightening the risks faced by local partners.

Many of the motivations for partnership receive almost universal approval. For example, donors, researchers and politicians alike are pleased to support partnerships as a means to attract and retain talented researchers at Southern institutions. Partnerships are also heartily welcomed as an opportunity for Northern and Southern counterparts to affirm the strategies developed in their respective communities. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the motivations for partnership are all equally benign. For example, in highly competitive milieus, researchers may cooperate with their foreign counterparts simply in order to undercut other potential partners. Numerous researchers in the South suggested to me that, for better or worse, many Northern researchers simply don't know what they are looking for when they approach potential Southern partners, confusing muddle-headedness for open-mindedness to Southern ideas and agendas.

To be sure, many Southern researchers in the “partnership market” are equally blurry about their own priorities, despite the fact that experienced partners recognize that balancing a clear set of strategic motivations with readiness to learn and adapt is the best preparation for the many obstacles that complicate negotiations on the collaborative research agenda.

## **PARACHUTING PARTNERS AND MERCENARY RESEARCHERS: AGENDA-SETTING OBSTACLES AND STRATEGIES**

Obstacles and responses to the challenges of equitable agenda-setting are intertwined as reactions to the issue often raise problems of their own. My discussions with researchers in the Middle East and Southern Africa underscored that the difficulties associated with creating equitable, locally-appropriate collaborative agendas are inseparable from a number of cross-cutting systemic challenges. As these problems elude easy and prompt resolution, astute Southern agenda-setting strategies are focused largely on limiting risks and hedging bets, with some “flag bearers” challenging the system at a deeper level, either by structuring innovative cooperative relationships in spite of marked structural constraints, or by “opting out” of North-South research partnerships altogether.

First and foremost, Southern researchers’ approaches to collaborative agenda-setting are shaped by the structure of the development research funding system, in which partnerships are the primary funding modality; financing is devoted to short-term projects, rather than long-term core support; and donors have predefined substantive interests, which change often enough to be labelled “flavours of the month” by jaded Southern researchers. While the vast majority of researchers hope their work makes a real contribution to improving wellbeing and combating disparity, many of the researchers I interviewed stressed the difficulty of crafting agendas that could meet donors’ demands for concrete and ideally immediate results in terms of poverty alleviation. Many researchers emphasized the difficulty of trying to anticipate the policy relevance of their work at the proposal stage, rather than once their results are clear, and underscored the need for more independent, theoretically demanding research. This is essential to the evolution of a strong research base in the South; as various interviewees stressed, sustainability in the research sector comes from the ability to make well-argued intellectual contributions to national and international debates, not just to churn out studies to match prescribed terms of reference. In the most extreme cases, donors completely preclude collaborative agenda negotiations by granting money to a Northern institution for collaborative research on a particular set of questions before a Southern partner is even identified. When the research agenda is a *fait accompli*, Southern researchers are sought out as “mercenaries”, a problem that is particularly severe in the case of consultancies, where the terms of reference are set by the contracting agency, with researchers given only minimal time and flexibility to react. While some researchers stoically accept this type of work as an inevitable part of making a living in cash-strapped Southern organizations, others rail against it as a cardinal example of the presumptuousness that makes collaborative research so draining.

The second major structural factor affecting Southern agenda-setting strategies is the existence of pervasive inequalities between prospective partners in the North and South. To be sure, Southern researchers do not necessarily enter agenda negotiations disadvantaged in terms of their scholarly and managerial skills. Many elite Southern researchers are not only intellectual leaders, but are also deft negotiators who use their role as gatekeepers to local research subjects to increase their leverage in the agenda-setting process. Yet, organizations' internal constraints inevitably limit the research agenda, as the scope of researchers' investigations is foreshortened by lack of time, staff and money. These organizational constraints are often particularly severe for Southern organizations, and hamper Southern partners' ability to respond to new issues that arise over the course of the partnership. Particularly well-planned partnerships budget extra funds to allow researchers to adapt or expand the research agenda to ensure its continued relevance in light of unforeseen events, discoveries or political changes. However, the amount of work that can be accomplished on a particular collaborative agenda is limited by the fact that, in the vast majority of cases, Northern researchers' time and efforts are extremely costly. On certain agendas, Southern researchers working independently or in cooperation with other Southerners could arguably make more progress than they are able to when tied to a collaborative model. On the other hand, collaboration has been instrumental to the introduction of entirely new fields of research into Southern countries. For example, cooperation between Norwegian and South African universities was instrumental to the establishment of African research programs dedicated to the study of fisheries, a longstanding area of specialization in the Nordic countries. In cases such as this, the inequalities that must always be dealt with in a collaborative research endeavour are particularly stark. Experienced researchers suggest that these inequalities should be frankly acknowledged by all sides, with the understanding that, as the partners develop new views and expertise, the agenda will be revisited and adjusted accordingly.

The third systemic factor that must be accounted for in Southern agenda-setting strategies is the fact that good partnership practice is rarely rewarded by the academic system. Tenure review committees are prone to take a disparaging view of the policy-relevant, multi-stakeholder, applied research that emerges from donor-funded North-South research partnerships (Rawoo 2001). Moreover, managing diverse research teams and facilitating equitable, culturally-sensitive yet rigorous agenda-setting processes are specific skills that are under-emphasized in traditional academic training (Ettorre 2000). Because there is little structured incentive or expectation that academics engage in respectful partnerships, harmful collaborative practices persist and are passed down to new generations of researchers.

Beyond these structural challenges, Southern researchers highlighted a number of other factors that both enrich and complicate the agenda-setting process. For example, even when partners agree on the broad content of their research agenda, pinning down viable research questions may be difficult, as many partners have been schooled in different academic traditions and theoretical frameworks, depending on linguistic, cultural, geographic and religious backgrounds. Agenda-setting processes are often smoother if researchers have comparable educational backgrounds, professional roles and political views. However, a growing number of partnerships strive to bring together diverse Northern and Southern actors, betting that cooperation between diverse actors will result in richer research questions and more perceptive findings. Researchers

involved in these multi-stakeholder initiatives suggest that rocky agenda-setting experiences are attributable not so much to the challenge of melding Northern and Southern interests, but to the difficulty of enabling cooperation between different actors, including academics, grassroots activists, policymakers and corporate leaders.

Agenda-setting processes can be frankly gruelling in partnerships that aim to advance volatile political processes, such as the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations. Changes in the political situation often necessitate revision of the collaborative agenda. Preparing for agenda negotiations by getting each side up to speed on one another's views and reactions to current events is a valuable process, but a cumbersome one that can drastically cut into the time available for actually negotiating the agenda and moving research forward. Some architects of cooperative projects in the Middle East try to take a proactive approach to this problem by circulating detailed information on partners' reactions to changes in the political landscape ahead of face-to-face meetings. Even when the researchers are in agreement, negotiations can be protracted due to slow-moving university and donor bureaucracies, which exacerbates the challenge of maintaining a timely, mutually acceptable research agenda.

Inter-personal chemistry and strong character judgement are essential to Southern researchers attempting to sidestep or resolve these agenda-setting obstacles. Almost unanimously, researchers stressed that partnerships sink or swim on the character and commitment of the individuals involved in them. While many researchers value having shared political views with their partners, even more critical are the attributes of flexibility, modesty and willingness to learn. Beyond the stated goals of collaborative initiatives, individual partners also strive to move forward "silent agendas", from padding their publication list in advance of a promotion, to increasing the partnership's advocacy role and theoretical richness. Astute partners recognize one another's informal interests, and are able to distance themselves from individuals and initiatives burdened by silent agendas they do not support.

Although strong inter-personal relationships are essential, researchers also stressed the importance of "institutional chemistry" to successful agenda-setting processes. While various guides provide extensive criteria for choosing appropriate partners, there is no strict recipe for effective institutional cooperation (KFPE 2005). Similar management and accounting styles are certainly beneficial; various Southern researchers suggest that institutional cooperation is easier when the Northern partner's country does not have an "imperial past." Institutional compatibility ensures that the partnership provides room for organizational growth, and is critical given that the individual members of collaborative teams often change over a project's lifetime. Strong institutional compatibility can smoothen these transitions. Researchers increase their institutional stake in research partnerships by ensuring that the collaborative agendas are negotiated by organization-wide teams, rather than only by senior management. This approach recognizes and responds to the fact that competing agendas may exist even amongst members of the same organization, and ensures that the collaborative agenda is backed not only by the institutional director, but also by the junior staff with responsibility for the day to day implementation of the project.



Individuals and institutions who gain the most from North-South partnerships do not tend to describe their partners in terms of specific, short-term projects. Rather, they have nurtured long-term inter-personal and inter-organizational relationships that often span multiple projects, and remain a source of insight and support even in the absence of donor funding. The development of long-term partnerships is an investment with considerable returns when it comes to agenda-setting, as negotiations benefit from the trust partners have built up, as well as their ability to be candid with one another and draw on past lessons to iron out present difficulties. Creating long-term partnerships requires dedication and ingenuity, as neither donor funding systems nor academic promotional frameworks are set up to reward sustained commitment between Northern and Southern partners. Long-term commitment is especially fundamental in unstable conflict and post-conflict locations where “parachuting partners” typically do not remain on the ground long enough to earn the trust necessary for locals to share their views. In fact, parachuting partners can erode local actors’ willingness to trust those Northerners who are committed to the long haul. Even between longstanding partners, difficulties can emerge if Southern researchers remain committed to a particular line of research while the Northern partners’ interests change. If Northern researchers decide to move on to new issues, they often “take the money with them”, limiting their former partners’ ability to advance the research agenda independently.

## **STRONG SOUTHERN INSTITUTIONS: THE LYNCHPIN OF SUCCESSFUL AGENDA-SETTING PROCESSES**

In light of the abundant obstacles to equitable agenda-setting, the strength of the Southern institution in a North-South partnership emerges as the foremost factor affecting the successful negotiation of a research agenda that is both mutually beneficial and rooted in Southern concerns. Currently, many partnerships are premised on the assumption that all those involved are well-intended, informed, culturally sensitive people, and that these qualities, in combination with due regard for “good partnership principles” are sufficient conditions for equitable, effective agenda-setting processes.

While good intentions and respect for Southern concerns on the Northern side can facilitate smooth agenda-setting processes, they cannot substitute for the advantages enjoyed by strong Southern organizations in partnership negotiations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that North-South research partnerships are bound to fail if Northern researchers lead the development of the research agenda. For example, the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) is a network of Canadian and Southern African researchers in operation since 1996. Headquartered in Canada, SAMP’s partnership model is based on Northern intellectual leadership, as reflected in the frank statement on the SAMP website that their Northern-based director is “responsible for setting and directing the [project’s] regional research agenda”. (See <http://www.queensu.ca/sarc/personne.htm>, accessed 18 May 2007.) Arguably, however, the project has benefited from the leadership of a Northern-based

In the context of North-South research partnerships, strong organizations are characterized by a realistic awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses; sound administrative systems; and relatively stable finances. Most importantly, they have a clear institutional mandate and agenda.<sup>13</sup> Strong organizations exist in both the North and South, but articulating and sticking to clear institutional goals is often a serious challenge for Southern institutions struggling to withstand economic and political instability or stagnation.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, Southern organizations appear to have clear agendas, but upon closer examination the “organizations” are only individuals whose agendas have not been enhanced through collegial debate, and do not necessarily enjoy the support of community members.

Even where Southern organizations have clearly defined agendas, they may be pressured by donors and local actors to disregard their chosen mandates. Many strong Southern organizations receive regular invitations to participate in a variety of partnerships unrelated to their goals. While these invitations may represent valuable opportunities for Southern organizations to expand their scope and skills, they may also detract from their focus and efficacy. Some specialized, driven Southern organizations perceive persistent pressure from donors and other actors to take on activities outside their carefully defined remits as an affront, reflecting lack of respect for the decisions the organization has made for itself. As the frustrated

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researcher with strong local connections and an “eagle-eye view” of the region, which has enabled the network to identify some innovative research questions that would not necessarily have been evident to researchers deeply embedded at the local level.

<sup>13</sup> Albeit critical, the question of how strong Southern research organizations emerge and evolve is largely outside the scope of this paper. My preliminary discussions with Southern researchers suggest that in certain cases North-South partnerships aimed at capacity building have supported the development of strong Southern research centres, but this is certainly not the only contributing factor. Concerted leadership from driven, well-trained and well-connected Southern researchers is typically essential to the creation and maturation of Southern institutions. IDRC’s experience confirms that cooperation between Southern institutions can be instrumental to the emergence of strong research centres and, in turn, vibrant national research communities.

<sup>14</sup> 14 Arguably, Northern institutions and coalitions are also increasingly unsure of their own agendas. Support for North-North cooperation is often even scarcer than funding for North-South interactions, despite the fact that interaction between diverse Northern communities and institutions is essential to establishing and refining solid advocacy and research agendas,. Consequently, Northern researchers from large and heterogeneous countries such as Canada often struggle to fully appreciate the scope of national experiences with issues such as indigenous self-governance and resource management. This limits Northern partners’ ability to contribute to the development of rigorous North-South research agendas.

director of a prominent Middle Eastern research centre expressed it, “It should matter what [our Institute] does. We should be able to say, ‘This is what we do.’”

Armed with a clear conception of their own motivations and agendas, strong Southern organizations also have a cluster of tools and strategies they can apply to increase the likelihood that their partnerships yield the desired benefits.<sup>15</sup> For example, many robust Southern organizations cultivate close connections with grassroots groups, which help them ensure that their agendas retain local relevance. Locally-connected Southern research institutions then serve as gatekeepers to grassroots populations, a role they use to increase their leverage in agenda negotiations. Close grassroots connections can also alert Southern researchers to ethical concerns associated with particular lines of research that could escape the attention of foreign review boards. By carefully establishing their credibility beforehand, strong Southern organizations may have the latitude to challenge assumptions and attitudes prevalent at the grassroots level and amongst policymakers, taking on agendas that are unpopular because they are seen to be donors’ “turf”. Equally, researchers working within reputable Southern institutions are well-placed to advance agendas critical of donor governments, because their institutional clout can mitigate the risk of funding being withdrawn in reaction to researchers’ criticisms.

In many cases, the senior staff of savvy Southern organizations prepare their colleagues for the challenges associated with collaborative agenda negotiations, and mentor them throughout the process. This has often proven more effective than the default approach of learning in the saddle. The leaders of strong Southern institutions also ensure that their researchers enter into collaborative negotiations with clear minimum criteria they expect the partnership to meet, which serve as a guide throughout the agenda-setting process.

To be sure, innovative, reputable Southern organizations face challenges of their own in collaborative research. These include the need to balance the desire for equity amongst partners with the pragmatic recognition that leadership is required if partnerships are to move forward. Even leading Southern organizations tend to operate in responsive modes where the creation of new partnerships is concerned, waiting for invitations from Northern parties rather than initiating collaborations themselves. Taken in total, however, the attributes discussed above strengthen Southern parties’ hands in agenda negotiations, and limit the cost to the Southern organization if a partnership does not materialize. Indeed, many researchers are proud of their ability to be selective in their partnerships, pursuing their own priorities even when they did not meet with outside support. Amongst leading Southern research organizations,

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<sup>15</sup> Where organizations are unclear about their own institutional strengths and goals, capacity assessment exercises can play an important clarifying role, both for donors and for the research institutions. These exercises can help determine whether partnerships should focus primarily on capacity building, in-depth research, or a mixture of the two. Open and honest assessment exercises may well conclude that North-South partnerships are not as relevant to the Southern organization’s institutional and scholarly goals as other funding modalities, such as core funding or South-South cooperation.

walking away from unsatisfactory partnerships is virtually a rite of passage. However, the researchers interviewed did not underestimate the difficulty of turning down partnership opportunities for struggling Southern institutions. The price of refusing or pulling out of North-South research partnerships is often not only financial, but also reputational, as organizations that step out of troubling partnerships may be labelled as belligerent or uncooperative, thus hindering their ability to secure new collaboration opportunities and influence decision-makers in the future. While recognizing the validity of these concerns, interviewees questioned whether nascent institutions could ever transform into successful, locally relevant organizations by simply going along with agendas forged in the North, and divorced from local priorities.

## CONCLUSION

Although strong Southern organizations are instrumental to successful, equitable North-South agenda-setting processes, in many fields of development research there are only a limited number of organizations involved, with strikingly different levels of capacity. North-South collaboration can certainly strengthen partnering institutions, and exciting research questions often emerge through the training and capacity building exercises that are part of many North-South partnerships. However, there are no Herculean partnerships; it is virtually impossible for a partnership to develop the capacity of an institution that lacks key resources and a firm set of priorities while pursuing a cutting-edge research agenda.

The challenges associated with collaborative agenda-setting are deeply rooted in academic politics; inter-cultural misunderstandings; and the structure of the international donor system, wedded as it is to a model of short-term, project-based collaborative financing. While bilateral donors such as the Netherlands and the UK have met with modest success in challenging the strictures of this model, their endeavours have inadvertently underscored researchers' and bureaucracies' resistance to change, even change which they rhetorically and morally support.

Strong Southern organizations are best placed to navigate the numerous obstacles associated with collaborative agenda-setting, but the magnitude of these obstacles is illustrated by the fact that some of the most reputable and well-skilled Southern organizations simply sidestep the issue, eschewing North-South research partnerships altogether. For the minority of organizations that can rely on the more flexible, direct funding offered by independent donors, the benefits of partnership often cannot outweigh the management burden and complex agenda negotiations that partnerships almost invariably entail. This calls into question the salience of the wide range of guidelines and principles that aim to reform the partnership experience (KFPE 1998, 2005). It is perhaps overly optimistic to hope that careful planning and laudable ideals can neatly avoid the entrenched problems that have complicated international research collaboration for decades.

The cross-cutting, structural nature of barriers to equitable agenda-setting and successful partnership should not dissuade researchers, donors and policymakers from tackling these issues. Partnerships make an essential contribution to understanding and responding to transboundary development challenges, and for this reason alone it is critical that the practice of partnership improves. However, this is an inescapably long-term endeavour. In the meantime, donors and researchers alike are well-advised to candidly recognize the limitations of partnership, and ensure that a broader range of funding modalities are applied in support of the creation and application of knowledge for development. Before settling on North-South partnership as a funding modality, detailed organizational assessments and negotiations between donors and researchers are in order. In these discussions, donors and Northern researchers should be willing to heed Southern researchers' calls for different forms of support, including greater levels of direct, core support. While this undoubtedly poses a challenge for those donor agencies formally obliged to exclusively support North-South partnerships, a commitment to respecting Southern perspectives and priorities must encompass not only the

substantive research agenda, but also the modalities through which development research funding is distributed. This type of flexibility is critical to ensuring that struggling Southern institutions can evolve into strong organizations well-equipped to hold their own in North-South agenda negotiations, and assist in strengthening other Southern organizations.

Northern researchers' critical reflections on partnership often stop short of this conclusion, focusing instead on how partnerships may be modified or improved, while retaining Northern researchers' place at the table. This may be in Northern researchers' short-term interests, but the goal of equitable collaborative agenda-setting would be better served if North-South research partnerships were initiated and financed more judiciously, alongside other approaches the supporting the creation of knowledge for development, including core funding and South-South partnerships.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that South-South research partnerships are immune from agenda-setting debates. As several Southern researchers suggested to me, all too often these partnerships mimic and even amplify the negative power dynamics associated with North-South research partnerships.

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